

Architecture Matters

(adapted from Royal Architectural Institute of Canada's "Choosing a Career as an Architect")

Put simply, architecture is the art, science, and business of building. Architects themselves are highly trained and experienced not only in the design and construction of built environments, but also in areas ranging from conceptual problem-solving to project management. Today, architectural professionals are vitally engaged in creating new buildings, retrofitting existing structures, and contributing their expertise in many important areas. Their professional concern for the client and the public interest may have an impact on anything from high-rises to furniture design, residential renovations to entire communities, or single-product research to sustainable development on a global scale.

The Profession Today

Today's architects may practise as individuals or in small, medium, or large firms. They may be self-employed or salaried; operate as a sole proprietor, partnership, corporation, or a partnership of corporations; or work for an institution, a development company, or a large public organization. Architectural clients may be a family, school board, corporation, housing authority, government office, or a contractor. Many architects develop their skills in generalist roles, but some are particularly motivated in certain areas of practice or professional skill. Both individuals and firms may choose to specialize in one of a number of areas and qualifications. Some architects are active in more aspects of the program/design/construction procedure than ever before. Some are working on very large projects while others may be working directly with users on smaller projects and with segments of society not usually served. The architect of today has an opportunity to work in many different capacities on an international scale, with many Canadian firms now practising throughout the world. In the Public Interest Architecture has always expressed the dominant theme of its time. It has frequently been a mirror of the values of its age, and the present is no exception. The eloquence and power of these building forms still move us, whether they bear witness to shared heritage, majesty, intellectual and artistic refinement, or human dreams, endeavours, or folly. Today, buildings are still called upon to express common purposes: places of worship, government buildings, or health, educational, and cultural institutions. Serving the public interest and ensuring public safety, through everything from meeting building codes to promoting sustainability, is a core component of contemporary architectural practice.

'Architecture Begins at Home'

Frequently, a young architect's first professional opportunity is to design or alter a dwelling. This is one of the most fascinating and meaningful problems in architecture: the design of the human habitat. There are many kinds of dwellings: single-family houses, cooperatives, townhouses, apartments, complexes for a wide range of incomes and various lifestyles. The dwelling place may be very much a part of the urban scene, high in the sky and close to shops, entertainment, or office towers, or it may be a rural home responsive to the beauty of water, forest, or mountains around the site. Beyond the dwelling itself is the outside world: private spaces for sun and garden, public spaces for work and play, a larger community to surround it, and transportation routes to connect it with the world.

Complexity Demands Expertise

Modern finance, business, and government activity, operating within an increasingly urban society of huge, interdependent centres, has generated the need for larger buildings. Large buildings frequently present special problems in such areas as traffic congestion, water provision, sewer and fire-fighting services, parking, and interference with the rights of owners and occupiers of adjacent buildings. The design of these buildings and their integration in the city form and function demands high degrees of understanding and competence; the technical problems of structure, climate control and vertical circulation, planning problems of flexible use and space efficiency, and aesthetic problems posed by their very size all demand special design skills.

Our Built Heritage

Good buildings, whenever they were completed, enrich our towns and cities. They add variety to the urban scene and remind us of the continuity of our human environment linking past and present. Frequently, their re-use is not only a mark of affection and respect for their human and architectural qualities, but also a practical recognition that with care and attention they have many years of useful life to offer. Renewed interest and economic realities are ensuring the preservation and restoration of old and historic buildings throughout Canada by many levels of government, private enterprise, and by dedicated individuals. Increasingly, evidence of such interest and effort towards understanding, respecting, and preserving our architectural heritage is to be found in Canadian cities, towns, and communities from coast to coast. This special field offers a wide range of career opportunities for members of the architectural profession.

Interior Vision

Interiors provide rich opportunities for architects and their occupants. Built spaces require colour and texture, furnishings and equipment to satisfy their users' needs conveniently and pleasurably. Architects seeking a unity in every aspect of their work undertake design responsibility for the total building, from its overall concept and construction to the decisions in furnishings, floor and wall treatments, fabrics, equipment, and fittings: everything from the relationship of the building to its environment to the design of a chair.

Urban Life

The problems and the potentials of our times are most evident in cities and urban centres. Urban problems largely have to do with social and economic matters. Architects, on the other hand, largely have to do with physical matters: buildings and spaces. So what connects such work with the essentials of the city? Many architects are involved in urban design, giving physical expression to the social, economic, and environmental determinants of city form. Some serve on planning boards and assist residents' associations, while architectural associations have set up committees, programs, and services available to the community. Sometimes architects are involved in design projects of particular civic significance, such as restoration areas, major shopping centres, housing developments or industrial estates. However, every individual building influences urban design quality in terms of functional and visual relationships to its surroundings.

Architects in Practice

In practice, an architect accepts a commission from a client: a person, a board of directors or a government agency. This commission may involve the design of a single building or a group of buildings and the spaces between them. Increasingly, the architect participates in the development of requirements the client wishes to have met in the building. Throughout the project, from planning to occupancy, the architect usually acts as the coordinator of a team of highly qualified specialists. Structural, mechanical, and electrical engineers and other specialists are generally retained by the building owner or the architect. The architect must ensure that the work of all these different disciplines is coordinated and fits together in the overall design. Architects must also deal with various government agencies on municipal, provincial and federal levels, regarding numerous codes and by-laws. In addition, close attention must be paid to the economics and budget for a particular commission. There are many factors that dictate the eventual design of a building. The architect does not work in a vacuum, and the final built form results from the input of many specialists and the client. Architecture is a business, of which the creative design part is only one aspect. Technical knowledge, administrative skills, and an understanding of good business practice are also important.

Professional Self-Regulation

Professionals, by definition, are legally responsible and liable for any negligent errors and omissions that they make. Architects are no exception, and they are licensed to assure the public that individuals calling themselves architects do have the qualifications necessary to practise. Licensing is the responsibility of provincial associations, who are also mandated to promote and increase the knowledge, skill, and proficiency of their members in all things relating to the profession of architecture, and to advance and maintain a high standard in the practice of architecture. Under the various provincial acts, professional associations are charged with the responsibility of prescribing qualifications of persons licensed to practise in each province, providing the means of control and discipline over their members, and are generally responsible for regulating the practice of architecture. The acts also make it an offence for persons, other than those licensed, to use the title 'architect,' providing for penalties to persons or corporations who do so illegally. In BC, the profession and practice of architecture is governed by the Architects Act of British Columbia, the administration of which is assigned to the AIBC.

There are three basic requirements, '**Education,**' '**Experience,**' and '**Examination,**' prior to registration. The educational requirement is usually fulfilled by satisfactory completion of an undergraduate and/or graduate program in architecture, accredited by the Canadian Architectural Certification Board (CACB). As an alternative, the apprenticeship route is available through successful completion of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC) Syllabus.

As a supplement to an individual's formal education, BC candidates are also required to attend a series of practice-related seminars prior to registration. The experience component is gained by following the Intern Architect Program. The candidate applies to the AIBC to enroll and selects a mentor, an experienced architect who helps guide work experience. An intern architect gains experience over a stipulated period of time working under the supervision and direction of an architect, in accordance with the experience requirements of the Intern Architect Program.

Another requirement for registration is successful completion of identified architectural examinations. Currently, the examinations involve nine computerized exams and the oral review. Upon successful completion of all components, the individual may apply to become registered as an architect and is eligible to apply for a licence to practice in BC. Architects may also apply to become members of the national voluntary organization, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC).